

Letter Writing Exercise

Joyce DiBenedetto-Colton

Educators can create an assignment for just about any course or discipline that engages students in civic letter writing.

The instructor should select a course objective that can be met by relating it to environmental ethics or ecological sustainability.

Prior to the letter writing activity, it would be helpful to show students a video clip or slides on a topic that relates sustainability to the course. Then have an open class discussion that allows students to hear different views, gets them thinking and helps motivate them to take action.

Then ask students to research a related sustainability issue of interest to them that they would like to draft a letter about, and to find out to whom such a letter should be most appropriately directed. This might include their own congressional representatives, senators, committee members, cabinet members or the president.

Provide students a sample letter, designating what components are required, and upon what criteria you will base your grading.

This doesn't need to be a complicated assignment. However, with a bit of effort, students will gain a useful and empowering skill.

(Sample letter attached.)

11340 SW 93 Street Miami FL 33176

March 20, 2009

Margaret Hamburg, Commissioner
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
5600 Fisher Lane
Rockville MD 20857

RE: Food safety and labeling laws

Dear Commissioner Hamburg,

First and foremost, congratulations on your recent appointment as FDA Commissioner.

As the head of the FDA, I am writing to you regarding a very serious concern.

In a recent college symposium on the Impact of Food on the Environment, I had the opportunity to examine numerous issues related to current food production practices and the effects these are having on the health of people in our country as well as the global environment. As part of the symposium, we were asked to identify the most pressing concerns about food security and draft a letter to an appropriate leader. Therefore, I am writing to you to request that you take the lead in facilitating labeling laws that identify food products that contain genetically engineered material.

It is time that the United States keep in step with other responsible nations that recognize the importance of consumer's rights by enacting laws that mandate the labeling of foods containing GE materials, like those enacted by all fifteen countries of the European Union as well as Australia, China, India, Israel, Japan, Switzerland, and numerous other countries.

Numerous polls around our country have shown there is an overwhelming majority of people in support of mandatory labeling of foods containing GE materials. It is also a widely held view that the government is pandering to the special interests of the biotech industry at the expense of a sustainable future, the integrity of our seed banks and natural systems, and is putting the health and well-being of its citizens at risk.

It is expected of you, as the head of the FDA, to be fully informed regarding the process of genetic engineering, so that you understand all that is at stake.

- The process of invading cells to alter DNA requires that viruses and antibiotic markers be inserted into genetically modified cells. There is evidence of intestinal lesions in individuals consuming certain GE vegetables. Industry confidentiality thwarts disclosure of this evidence.
- Contamination of natural and conventional seed stocks is occurring worldwide through open-air cross-pollination which means we are losing the integrity of seeds as well as the diversity that is so critical to our future food security.
- Without labeling, there is virtually no traceability, so there is little chance of reliable scientific evidence regarding the effects of GE foods and crops on consumers or our ecosystems, nor accountability.

To this end citizens look to you to protect the interests and health of individuals for whom you are charged with the duty to safeguard, rather than accommodating the interests of biotech corporations. I strongly request that you employ the Precautionary Principle by taking responsibility to intervene and safeguard the public from harm since there is substantial evidence of numerous risks directly related to GE crops. Let the

burden of proof be on the biotech industries to produce sound and unequivocal scientific evidence of the safety of their products and their handling of them. In the European Union, the precautionary principle is a general and compulsory principle of law. The United States must have the political and moral will to do the same.

Wishing you all the best in your new position,
Sincerely,

Joyce DiBenedetto-Colton, MS, CHES – joycedibened@hotmail.com

cc: President Barack Obama
Charles E. Johnson, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Tom Vilsack, USDA Secretary
and the Food Safety Working Group

Addresses for CC:

President Barack Obama
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Washington DC 20500

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Washington, D.C. 20201

Tom Vilsack, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

U.S. Food Safety Working Group